WONDER
December 23, 2007

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Psalm 96
Isaiah 7:10–14
Matthew 1:18–25

"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son,
and shall name him Immanuel"
Isaiah 7:14 (NRSV)

For those who believe in the transcendence and total otherness of God,
it radically diminishes him. For those who do not believe in God,
it is the ultimate absurdity. For those who stand somewhere
between belief and unbelief, it challenges credulity in a new way.
It is not a theory that can be tested rationally because it is beyond reason
and it is not a theory, not something theologians have thought their way to.
The claim is, instead, that it is something that has happened, and reason itself
is somehow tested by it, humankind's whole view of what is possible and real.
Year after year the ancient tale of what happened is told—raw, preposterous, holy—
and year after year the world in some measure stops to listen.

Frederick Buechner
"Emmanuel"
A Room Called Remember

Five-year-old William, whose parents drive him all the way down from Lake Forest to attend Sunday School here, gave me a perfect way to begin this Christmas sermon. As his mother was tucking him in bed last week, he said, "Mommy, there's a problem at Sunday School." "Oh," Betsy, his mother, said, "and what is the problem, William?" "Well," little William said, "the problem is that all they talk about is Jesus. They never say anything about baseball." His mother said, "I thought you'd like that."

Well, yes indeed, but the Cubs did give us an early Christmas gift last week in a new right fielder. Sad to say William, but some people don't know about, or care about, it, but William, you and I just found a way to get baseball into a Christmas sermon. The gift's from Japan, and his name is

Fukudome and I'm grateful. But yes, you're right, William: it is about Jesus. It's his birthday, and a safe bet is that people all over the world are thinking about him today, talking about him and the story of his birth and singing songs about him. In fact, people have been singing Christmas music pretty much nonstop for months now: Christmas music in all the stores, elevators, restaurants; radio stations playing nothing but Christmas music. "Do You Hear What I Hear?" Silver Bells" "The Little Drummer Boy"—slowly driving some of us to distraction as Calum MacLeod so eloquently put it in a devotion he wrote last week.

David James Duncan addresses the subject in a delightful book, *God Laughs and Plays.* He's an author who writes about religion and culture with both humor and deep understanding. He remembers that when he was young and his older bother died, in his grief he decided to honor his brother, whom he describes as his best friend, by adopting his brother's habits, his likes and dislikes, even his tastes in music. The problem was that his brother's favorite Christmas song was "The Little Drummer Boy," which Duncan always hated. He writes,

> Think about the song's basic premise. Here is some uninvited urchin, standing right next to the cradle of a newborn baby, banging away on a *drum*. Have any vindictive relatives ever given a child in your home a drum? "Pah rum pah pum pum" is an extremely kind description of the result. Yet out of reverence and love, this unidentified "poor boy" marches up to the manger of the sleeping Christ child and bangs away on his drum. . . . I liked to picture the infant Jesus' eyes, so innocent and new that they were unable to focus, startling wide open at the sudden banging. I liked to picture God the Father, wincing On High, wanting to cover his beloved son's ears. . . . send in the Wise Men to stop the banging, only to sigh, swallow his anger and think, "Nope. These are mortals. This is earth. This is my beloved son among mortals on earth. Let the drummer boy drum."

Now, Duncan says, every December the first time he hears "The Little Drummer Boy,"

> the chills run from my spine to my eyes sometimes spilling over as the truth hits me: the truth of our spiritual poverty gets to me every time. The line, "I played my best for him, pah rum pah pum pum." What more can one offer, no matter how silly or bad it sounds? The line, "Then he smiled at me pah rum pah pum pum." What more can we hope for than to please the Vast Emptiness, the Child King? (*God Laughs and Plays*, pp. 13–15)

The way Matthew tells the story, Joseph is the pivotal figure. Mary ordinarily gets all the attention—the carols, the great art, the devotion and

adoration. In the small nativity scenes in our homes and on our coffee tables, Joseph doesn't have anything to do but stand in the back row and watch. But the way Matthew tells it, it all begins with Joseph—and his dilemma. His fiancée, his "betrothed"—which means that Joseph had negotiated with Mary's family while she was young and she was promised to him, bound by law to him—Joseph's young fiancée announces that she is pregnant, and Joseph knows he's not the father. You can't have a more human dilemma than that. Joseph, Matthew tells us, is a "righteous man." That means he takes his religion very seriously, and for him religion means the Law of Moses. The law stipulates that because Mary is his legally betrothed, she should be tried for adultery and executed by stoning. But before Jesus is born, Joseph has second thoughts about the conventional religious definition of righteousness. He resolves not to turn Mary over to the authorities but to send her away. Joseph, that is to say, while often overlooked, is the first person to break out of the confines of conventional religious morality, the first to discover that the coming of the child redefines righteousness and morality and ethics.

Then comes the dream in which Joseph learns that the child to be born is from God. And he makes a second amazing decision: he'll go through with the marriage. He will be Mary's husband and the child's father. When the baby arrives, it is Joseph who names him Jesus. And then he takes his place in the back row, doing what new fathers have always done—watch and wonder.

Matthew ties the whole drama to something the prophet Isaiah said centuries earlier:

> Look the virgin shall conceive [actually Isaiah said "the young woman"]
> and bear a son
> and they shall name him
> "Immanuel," which means "God with us."

The interesting thing about that earlier passage is that Isaiah is writing about a king who was in a very messy international, geopolitical situation. His name was Ahaz, and powerful forces were bearing down on him. Powerful armies were poised at his borders. The future looked very frightening. And at that very moment, the prophet starts talking about a sign God will send: a young woman will bear a son, Immanuel, "God with us." And "God with us" will make all the difference in the world.

There is seemingly no end to the human interest in the topic of God. A number of recent best sellers argue against the very idea of God—*The God Delusion, God Is Not Great*. Critics point out that there isn't anything in any of them that you didn't hear in a late night bull session in college. Nevertheless they are best sellers. And in the meantime, more than 90

percent of us continue to believe there at least is a God, but there the unanimity stops. Someone gave me the December issue of a magazine called *Time Out Chicago,* with the cover article "Who Cares About God—Chicagoans Speak Out." The responses were all over the map, to say the least, reflecting the religious diversity of our city. Some were bizarre:

> Billy Riley is into New Age Spirituality, believes in anything that embraces love. . . . "I flow in the energy of the bobcat. The bobcat comes down from the mountain, mingles, then goes back up."
>
> Ruby Keutzer pictures God in a white gown with long hair. . . . "I picture him just floating."

In the midst of this God-saturated culture, this culture so hungry for a genuine, authentic religion, Christianity makes a stunningly simple claim. In the child, "God with us": here, in this world, this mundane, wonderful life of ours. God is here, with us.

When it comes to God, we prefer abstractions: God as a theory, a concept, the God of the philosopher. God as the One. God as the Prime Mover. God as the First Cause. God as the Force.

And here is the child, God with us, here in our midst, in the middle of such a human situation: no room in the inn, pushed around by impersonal political powers, powerless victim of Roman imperial decrees, out back in the dirt and chaos of a cow barn . . . God with us.

Think of what that says about God and God's power. Think about how vulnerable that makes God. God puts this whole project in the hands of a man, a carpenter. God comes in a way that forces that man, Joseph, to make decisions and act on them. God becomes vulnerable to, subject to, a human being whose decisions and actions either will or will not advance God's kingdom. There's something in that about human responsibility. When God acts, it is not a matter of pulling strings, pulling off great cosmic miracles. It is a matter of stirring a man, a woman, to be responsible, to live and act faithfully, to do what God wants done. There's something in that of God's call to you and me—to be responsible for the project God started with the birth of the child, God with us.

Joseph made his decision and acted on it and the child was born. And then he took his place—watching and wondering.

That, too, is part of what Christmas is about, the wonder of it. In fact, it seems to me that one of the best things Christmas does is reactivate the capacity for wonder, which, frankly, most of us keep on the shelf most of the year.

One of the best books of theology I know is *Apology for Wonder*, by Sam Keen. It is a scholarly analysis of the human capacity to experience wonder and how, as we grow up, we lose that capacity from childhood to adulthood. Keen discusses "Ontological Wonder"—wonder at the fact that something exists rather than nothing—and "Mundane Wonder"—at a starry sky, a beautiful sunset, a good apple. Children have that literally wonderful capacity: wide-eyed astonishment at life. Three-year-old Ella was introduced to homemade strawberry ice cream last summer, soft and creamy. As she devoured her second bowl, she looked up and announced, "I love, love, love this ice cream!"

We lose that capacity for wonder and delight in the common mundane things of life because we're so busy, driven, compulsive. We lose our capacity for wonder when we buy into the mindset that everything in life can be analyzed, weighed, measured, evaluated as to its market value, and if it can't, it is of no account. We lose the capacity for wonder when life wears us down and we decide to be guarded, wary, cynical.

Dag Hammarskjöld said, years ago, "God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."

Sam Keen, who had young children when he wrote his book on wonder, said, "The process of conception, gestation, and birth can be adequately explained, but the event of birth is as productive of wonder for modern minds as it was for the primitives, who somehow vaguely thought the whole process was caused by the power of the moon."

God with us — a sign for you. Every birth, every child, every baptism — here in this church — is a sign that God is with us.

Let Joseph be your mentor and guide. Stop the frenzied rush, the sprint to the finish line, which is what the next two days feels like sometimes, and take your place in the back row—watching and wondering.

Listen to the familiar carols
Hold a child if you can, a sign of God's presence
Open your heart to love
Say "thank you"
Say "I love you"
And wonder at the love of God

Immanuel—God with us, wherever we are, whatever is happening to us. A member of this congregation sent me a copy of a letter this week from a

family friend who was a Navy chaplain during the Vietnam War. His family has kept these occasional letters from Vietnam over the years. He thought I might be interested in this one. Chaplain William Hampton wrote, from Khe Sanh, the site of one of the worst battles, on March 17, 1968. He described how young Marines, frightened, dirty, weary, fresh from combat, crawled into the small dugout cave that was their chapel, only twelve at a time. The surroundings, he said, were "starkly simple and earthy: a makeshift table, a plate of bread, a cup of wine. The atmosphere couldn't help but remind one of the stable-cave in which the Son of God became human flesh; and now, in this small, underground assembly, he promised to be present again.

"The service took place to the accompaniment of a continual anthem of incoming rockets, mortars, artillery strikes shaking the ground on which the small group stood, often striking dangerously close."

Chaplain Hampton said, "God still comes to his people as he always has, even in the center of the hellish nonsense humankind calls war."

God with us: a sign—of God's presence with you and me, in every day, every situation, in every birth, our birth, in our growing and becoming, in our rejoicing and our weeping, in our struggling and our loving, in our suffering and our dying. God with us. The wonder of it all.

Amen.